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ABSTRACT

A brief review of the nature of teaching methodology and instructional materials used in traditional and audiolingual language programs focuses on weaknesses considered to be inherent in long, sequential programs. The remainder of the article discusses the development of instructional modules which allow greater opportunity for individualizing instruction. Remarks focus on: (1) developmental objectives, (2) instructional level and audience, (3) current research, (4) program evaluation, and (5) module content. (RL)

French-Language Teaching Modules: a new approach to language-teaching materials

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Ray Elsass demonstrating one of the components of the weather module

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Until very recently, language-teaching materials consisted mainly of *textbooks,* containing narratives, grammatical exposition, exercises, and a glossary. In addition, teachers had at their disposal other aids, such as readers, books of drills and exercises, song books, and so on. But the textbook was essential and central to the language program.

Since the mid-fifties, several attempts have been made to produce course materials which are not primarily book-based but present the basic content of the course on tapes, or on filmstrips with tapes, so that the student reads and writes less and listens and speaks more. The resulting materials are the so-called *audiolingual and audiovisual programs.* In this approach the book is entirely ancillary to the course.

Now also on the market are course materials combining the first and second approaches in one or several large kits which in extreme cases provide a complete and fully integrated program from the beginning to the end of a school language curriculum.[1]

All these programs are planned as comprehensive teaching sequences. They provide a syllabus, teaching materials, and methods, as well as a regular progression in the language concerned. Under ideal circumstances, their value is evident: in offering a gradual progression and a secure sequence, they can act as the teacher's daily companion throughout the length of the course. Good programs, clearly geared to the particular needs of groups of students, can make a substantial contribution to the improvement of language teaching. Conversely, bad or unsuitable programs can ruin the best of intentions. The importance of these course materials has been widely recognized by language teachers, and in recent years wherever reforms of language teaching have been planned, they have led to the introduction of such new course materials.

In Ontario, as elsewhere, the principal medium of innovation has been the development and introduction of sequential teaching programs which incorporate certain current pedagogical and linguistic theories. While these programs constitute a real advance and help teachers to give their French teaching a new and desirable emphasis, the majority have several weaknesses.

Some are based on a rigidly audiolingual approach to language teaching, which was very much in fashion around 1960 but which has since been subjected to severe criticism on both theoretical and practical grounds. Although teachers are on the whole pleased with them now, it is likely that after a few years one important feature of these programs, the massive amounts of repetition and monotonous structure drill, will be found to be a disadvantage.

Then, too, some which were produced in the States, France, and Great Britain do not take into account Canada's special situation. They present French as a foreign rather than a second language, and in so doing are ill suited to our Canadian situation.

Yet another weakness exists in the fact that most of these materials are teacher-based and cannot be adapted to meet the current demand for 'open' schools and individualized instruction. Nor can they be tailored to meet the varying needs of students that have arisen in Ontario because the constantly changing educational scene has made uncertain not only the length of time the student will study French but also the age at which he will start.

Teachers may also find it difficult to adapt these programs to their own needs. Most programs reflect a highly individual approach to teaching – usually that of its author. Such a style cannot always be duplicated, even if the teaching situation is similar to the one for which the program was developed.

Added to the relative inflexibility of these integrated programs is the high cost factor. The production of an integrated program requires enormous resources. If these are withdrawn, the effort loses its impetus. Moreover, the investment by the school board purchasing such a program is usually so large that a change cannot be contemplated, even if the program in use has become inappropriate.

In more general terms, any course or program is based on certain linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical presuppositions. If these never changed, the production of a good integrated program would indeed be a worthwhile goal. But teaching circumstances and our knowledge of linguistics and its application are constantly evolving. Consequently, the most carefully prepared programs, even when they are adjusted to specific student needs, can suddenly become inappropriate because of administrative changes, changes in the structure of the educational set-up, and new developments in linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical thinking.

In other curriculum areas we have begun to realize the varied nature of learning and the need for more individualized instruction. In language teaching, we have largely ignored individual differences in learning. Although these variations are a serious worry to language teachers, producers of language programs

still tend to gloss over the differing rates of student progress.

If we accepted the fact that language learners have varying backgrounds, approach learning in varying ways, and progress at varying rates, we should soon see that the existing type of long sequential language program, however good in itself, has serious disadvantages. It is ill suited to the current demand in education for a more flexible, more student-initiated, educational process.

Modules

With these thoughts in mind, we have begun to experiment with a new concept of program development in modern languages which we call 'modules.'[2]
A module is a unit or kit, independent of existing programs, dealing with one specific aspect of iearning a language. A module can present information on a given subject (e.g., on the culture of a region), teach a linguistic feature (e.g., the negative), or provide practice (e.g., in listening). Its format is flexible, but it must be clearly related to its purpose. In many cases, modules are likely to be offered as small multi-media kits. Some may be for use in class, others may be programmed for self-instruction or independent use. They can be addressed to a particular age and grade level or have application over a wide range. Instead of offering a fixed preordained progression, modules can be compiled into a 'bank' of units which can be used in whatever way they suit a particular course, teacher, or set of students.

Eventually, a bank of modules might be considered an alternative to an existing fixed sequential program. Up to now, the materials producer has presented the teacher with a large package deal, a fully furnished house with all its advantages and disadvantages. We believe that in the future one might well provide a teacher with independent teaching units from which he can construct his own house.

However, it will take a long time to develop a sufficient number of modules to offer the equivalent of a published program. What modules can do now or in the near future is to complement existing programs and make up for gaps and deficiencies without upsetting the pattern of the program. Teachers are, of course, quite accustomed to using supplementary materials, such as readers, records, visuals, games, and puzzles. In a way, these are not really too different from modules. Indeed, many of these supplementary materials fulfill the same role as modules or could easily be converted into them. What makes modules different is that they are not intended as additives, as short-lived novelties, or as a little sugaring on the pill of language learning.

Objectives

It is essential to define the objectives of each module in precise terms. These objectives should be related to the specified needs of students and programs. They should state what information or skill the student should have at the end of the module that he did not have before. However, we include among the possible objectives some lighthearted and general ones, such as giving enjoyment without necessarily adding a clearly defined didactic dosage.

Audience

A module should be directed to a specified audience. In defining the target audience for the modules we are developing at OISE, we have looked to the Ontario schools first and foremost, but this should not prevent the modules from being relevant outside the province. We have attempted to design modules for clearly specified groups in terms of age and level of knowledge; nonetheless, some modules might be used anywhere in a given program.

Research

An essential step in the production of the modules is the finding of source and resource materials. For instance, in preparing a module on French Canada, the principal research would consist of seeking out the relevant aspects, sources, and first-hand data that warrant inclusion. The sources and research that have gone into the preparation of each module would of course be clearly stated in the material accompanying it.

Evaluation

When the module has been produced in trial form, it should be subjected to the criticism of experienced persons. Then, in the pilot stage, it should be experimentally tested in the type of classroom for which it is intended. On the basis of this testing, it should again be evaluated and revised, and this revised version should then be produced in small numbers for further validation under normal classroom conditions. After yet a third revision, which gives it its final form, it should be ready for wide-scale sale and distribution.

Content

It was decided that the best way to determine the content of modules would be to ask teachers of French in Ontario what strengths and weaknesses they perceived in the programs they are presently using, and what modules would best make up for the deficiencies. To find an answer to this, we drew up a questionnaire, which was sent to a sample of teachers representative of the ten administrative regions in the province and the grades between 1 and 13 where French is taught.

Their replies to the questionnaire indicate that the modules most needed initially are those which increase student motivation and arouse interest in the French language and culture. Once a sufficient number of 'motivational' modules have been produced, the teacher could choose which modules to use according to the age and interests of the class. Some of the motivational modules might promote French-language activities by bringing to the classroom French-language games, skits, crossword puzzles, and so forth. The teachers surveyed also frequently requested modules relating to such festivals as Halloween, Christmas, and Easter, which could be used at the appropriate time of year, and ones including materials about French Canada, which would bring to the classroom French Canadian songs, information about festivals, people, places, and events. Such motivational modules should help to make the content of French classes more relevant and timely while relieving the teacher of some of the time-consuming job of gathering materials and information.

Example of a Module

French and French-Canadian radio provides a valuable source of listening materials often consisting of spontaneous and unscripted talk. Some teachers, of course, already bring taped radio features, such as news broadcasts, to the classroom. But the average student needs a good deal of preparation before he can make adequate use of this readily available source of spoken French; radio broadcasts are by no means easy for most students to follow. With this in mind, we have begun to plan several modules which will prepare the student for listening to French radio. In the more elementary radio modules, the listening component will be simulated and simplified radio features. In the more advanced ones, the recorded material will be based directly on the original broadcasts. A radio module might consist of the following items in a small kit:

1. A folder providing background information and guidance to French radio programs which are available in Canada, including an introduction to the stations, program timetables and guidance on where to find current listings, information about some programs, etc.
2. A booklet providing background information about the recorded material in the module. This could be information about the speaker and/or the subject of the module, including visuals such as diagrams, maps, or a filmstrip, where appropriate.
3. Recorded material on tape or cassette. This forms, of course, the heart of the radio module.
4. A full script of the recorded material.
5. A glossary of words and expressions, together with observations on language features to which attention should be drawn.

6. A teacher's and/or student's guide to the kit, including suggested uses of the kit.
7. A workbook with practice material and tests to be used only if the teacher wishes.

The content of the radio modules will be based on authentic radio programs. The topics covered might include:
Political news (e.g., Quebec 1970)
Non-political features (e.g., radio plays or stories)
Weather reports (summer, winter)
Sports reports (football, hockey, skiing)

We are at present working on modules on the weather. The preliminary research led to the collection of actual weather reports from French radio stations and of the meteorological information the listener would need to understand these reports, including one or two relatively elementary books on weather forecasting. From this preparatory research, we are finding what vocabulary and structures are needed to understand most weather reporting.

Several modules on the weather will be needed to lead students to an understanding of authentic weather reports. The first of these, which is now in preparation, contains the following simulated recorded weather forecast:
'Voici la météo pour le Canada:
En Colombie britannique: ensoleillé, plus chaud cet après-midi.
En Alberta: ensoleillé.
En Saskatchewan: ensoleillé, possibilité d'averses cet après-midi.
Au Manitoba: ensoleillé, possibilité d'averses en fin d'après-midi.
En Ontario: ensoleillé.
Au Québec: ensoleillé.
et Terre-Neuve: brume et possibilité d'orages.
Ici le Canada, ne quittez pas l'écoute.'[3]

Another part of this module consists of sheets with meteorological maps, such as the one illustrated, and a tape instructing students on how to identify the weather and temperature in different parts of Canada.

Other Modules
In the course of planning another module on French Canada, we have recorded interviews with a number of Quebec students in French. We hope to base at least one and perhaps several modules on the views of these young Québecois.

In a totally different vein, we are trying to meet the dearth of material for young children learning French at the kindergarten level with an activity-centered module based on an imaginary story and employing life-size figurines, stuffed animals, and cut outs.

As every module will only be put into final production after very stringent classroom testing, their completion is likely to take some time. While there is no shortage of material on the market right now, much of it is rapidly produced, under-researched, and under-tested. It is not our intention to add merely another novelty. What we hope is, first, to add something that is useful, but lacking in existing materials, and second, to encourage teachers with ideas, imagination, and the necessary research outlook to develop such modules themselves.

The success of the present project will depend a good deal on the cooperation of school boards and teachers of French willing to participate in the development and testing of these modules. We are also planning to produce modules in Russian and German later on. If you are a language teacher interested in the work we are doing on developing new language-teaching materials, you are invited to write or telephone us at the Modern Language Center, OISE.

Notes
1. For further information on existing French-language teaching materials, see H. H. Stern and A. Weinrib, 'New French Programs: A Consumer's Guide,' *Orbit 1* (February 1970), 8-11.
2. A module with a different definition was conceived by Earl W. Stevick for the Peace Corps language-training programs. His idea was to produce, 'for each area of intense interest, a course that presented the structure of the language within the limited vocabulary of that area.' Described in Earl W. Stevick, *The Modular Mousetrap* (Washington, D.C.: Foreign Service Institute, 1967).
3. The modules are being prepared and tested by Raymond Elsass, a project officer at OISE.